

Journey to Dunhèasa

May 14, 2006

1 Prologue

The graduate student walked out of her lab towards an open spot on campus and gazed up into the stars. In one hand was her take-down recurve bow with an ovankol riser with imbuaya and maple highlights and black walnut limbs. On her hip was a quiver filled with cedar arrows with fluorescent yellow and black shield-cut fletching. She nocked an arrow to the string and then easily drew the bow with authority and power before releasing the arrow skywards. The arrow burst into a cold blue flame before vanishing. At the same time, a previously invisible mark on her arm that looked like a wolf superimposed on a bow began to glow with a bright silver light.

"How dare you summon me, you who have fallen far from my grace?" asked a menacing voice in her mind.

Focusing her mind, the graduate student fidgeted with the wolf-like silver ring she wore on a silver chain around her neck. "I just want to let you know that I don't recommend your course of action. I know you want to bring Dunhèasa back to her full glory, but as strong as you are, I don't know if you can overcome all that has happened here."

"Foolish, defiant rebel! I should smite you right here as an example, but I sense that you may yet be of use to me, so I shall spare you this time. But next time, I will have to kill you."

"You've been saying that for the last several years," thought the graduate student. "And you still haven't smited me." Standing calmly, the graduate student merely shrugged and began to concentrate. An image of a young woman of mixed Hispanic and Asian descent materialized in the light from the ring. This woman was almost a spitting image of the graduate student with her thick glasses, short dark hair, and apparently, in her choice of studies as well. Next to her was a pile of books on biogeography, ecology, GIS, and nonlinear dynamics, and she had a maple recurve bow with red-fletched black arrows next to it. "So you're going to use her? Aren't you going to learn from me and Little Sparrow that nerds are going to find some way to backfire?"

Then the image shifted again and showed an image of an unconscious young man who lay half-naked in a small, smoke-filled room with bruises up and down his arm and a few fresh needle-incisions near the bruises. He twitched spastically for a bit before his hand absently wandered on the ground, heedless of the used crack-pipes and syringes nearby. Surrounding him were other people who were passed out, although one person remained conscious, smoking something before screaming incoherently. "Damn. This is getting creepy," mumbled the graduate student. "That dude looks too much like a younger version of..."

Her reverie was broken by the appearance of a tall, muscular man with short brown hair. "You ok? I got a bit worried when you didn't pick up your lab phone." The ring still glowed brightly, as did the mark on her arm, but the image that the ring had conjured up vanished.

"You never told me about this," he said, examining her arm closely. As soon as he touched her arm, a shadow passed over her and threatened to crush the life out of her, but she merely gasped before collapsing into her friend's arms.

"I guess it's time I told you the rest of the story... I thought that chapter of my life closed when I met you..." trailed the graduate student before letting her friend help her back to her feet.

2 Of Wishes and College Life

Soronthrel Cuthali3n waited patiently on the ridge with Telcontar, her trusty recurve bow in hand. Already, her fellow archers had loosed their arrows at the target below with varying rates of success. Finally, it was her turn to climb up to the tower and shoot the target. Cautiously, she gripped the rungs of the ladder and made her way up, her boots scarcely making a sound. After ascending into the tower, she surveyed the valley below. The target, a large foam mule deer buck, was far below among the sages and bunchgrasses. Already eight or nine meters above the ground, Soronthrel estimated her shot to be about eighty meters away at an angle of about sixty degrees down. She nocked one of her black-shafted, red-fletched arrows to her bow and then paused to feel the wind. Done with her analysis, she stood on the stepstool in the tower, took aim, drew back the arrow, and then loosed it. Shortly after she released her arrow, shouts of "She hit the kill-zone!" filled the air.

Together with the other four archers, she went to the target in the valley below. The wind had picked back up and Soronthrel pulled her grey sweater back on. "Looks like another ten-point shot for Soronthrel," called out Lars, a grizzled old man with a longbow. "And George and I took eights, Arash took a six, and Bill and Bubba took zeroes. Bubba is also down an arrow," shouted Lars above the wind, holding up a broken hot pink-fletched purple aluminum arrow.

George, a burly older man with a bushy red and grey beard, pulled out some cards and began to write all the numbers Lars had called out. "Soronthrel is easily kicking our asses and she's not even using a sight or anything like Bubba and me. She's a real natural and she's young enough to be one of our daughters or even grand-daughter in the case of me and Lars. This is target fifty of fifty, Soronthrel is at five hundred, I'm at three-fifty, Lars is at two-eighty, Arash is at three ninety-nine, Bill is at two twenty, Bubba is at one twenty."

The annoying ring of her cell phone jolted Joanne out of her sleep. The muscular young woman with hawk-like eyes known as Soronthrel Cuthali3n diminished into Joanne de Salvo, the severely nearsighted, out-of-shape college student and virtual post-doc. Groggily, she picked up the cell phone to shut off the obnoxious ringtone, which was based on the hit song, "Dragostea Din Tei" by O-Zone. If there was anything that could wake up a heavy sleeper like her, it was the sound of any vibrant, high-energy song by O-Zone.

"Hello? Dr. Qiu?" she mumbled, wishing she could've stayed a few more minutes as Soronthrel Cuthali3n.

"It's Dr. Qiu. Sorry to wake you up, this is just reminder that we will meet at noon to go over ArcIMS and how to run ArcExplore on Sparc Solaris 9. See you in a few hours."

"See you then." With the combination of the ringtone and an active caller ID system, Joanne had no trouble recognizing that it was none other than her absent-minded geography adviser, even though he kept forgetting that phones were now equipped with caller ID.

Grumbling, Joanne crawled out of her bed and dragged herself out, trying to force herself back to being Joanne de Salvo, student at Cal State LA who worked hard under the direct

mentorship of Dr. John Gamon and Dr. Hong-lie Qiu. "Why do I keep dreaming about archery? Third time this week already," she muttered to herself. "I haven't done it for over two years." The rest of her morning and afternoon, nothing more happened beyond the normal: Dr. Qiu lectured for five hours instead of two, Dr. Gamon called repeatedly to ask for more analyses results for publication in the SpecNet special issue of Remote Sensing of Environment, and she was the only student in Dr. Qiu's seminar who was comfortable using vi and Linux.

"Hey, this might be a good references for you, Joanne," called out Dr. Qiu, following her out to the parking lot. "Claudio et al on using the water band index for evapotranspiration estimation, Claudio and Chowdhury on continuum removal of the water band index, and her senior thesis on evapotranspiration modeling using the FAO Penman-Monteith equations."

"Thanks, Dr. Qiu," replied Joanne, taking the pile of papers from Dr. Qiu. "I'll go through them and I'll let you know when I'm ready to go over them with you."

As Joanne began to drive home, she inserted one of her favorite CDs, a mixture of various songs she had copied from her computer. The first song that began to play was Moenia's "Sildavia", and she let out a heavy sigh. "If there was only a place like Moenia's Sildavia or J. M. Barrie's Neverland for me," she said to herself before she began to sing along with the smooth male singing voice that she found strangely attractive.

*No tengas miedo de perderte, no.
El tiempo pasa tan despacio en Sildavia.
No hay desiertos, no hay falsa pasión.*

*Un nuevo destino para el ocio.
Errante en busca de un lugar.
Pregunta primero a tu imaginación.
Sildavia no se halla en los mapas.*

*Distrae los sentidos en el silencio.
Es el jardín de las delicias.
Domina tu vuelo en el espacio.
El sol no derretirá tus alas.*

*No tengas miedo de perderte, no.
El tiempo pasa tan despacio en Sildavia.
No hay desiertos, no hay falsa pasión.*

As she finished the last repeat on the chorus, she saw a wounded eagle lying on the sidewalk. Without a second thought, she parked the car and approached the magnificent silver-feathered bird. "Calm down," she whispered. "I just want to take a look and get you to safety." Gingerly, her hand went to the eagle's wing, where a large wound marred its beauty. She took a bandage out of her pocket and placed it on the wound. "This is only until I can take you to safety," she said as reassuringly as possible. The eagle merely keened in pain before she lifted it up and held it close. "You'll make it, please don't die..." she continued softly, trying to keep the eagle calm.

While Joanne drove her car, there was a bright flash of light where the eagle lay. In its place was a tall woman with strong aquiline features, jet-black wild hair, and a longbow next to her. "Thank you. I cannot properly reward you now, but if you go to the Arroyo tonight, you will receive your reward," she said in a melodious yet powerful voice. "And be sure to bring your bow and you must come alone. What has happened today and what will happen tonight, you must not speak of to anyone, even those closest to you." With that, the woman vanished, leaving Joanne completely confused and alone with a large silver feather as proof that it really happened.

Once she got home, she turned on her cranky laptop computer, which beeped and blipped in protest at being activated again. While she waited, she went to her radio to play some music and after fumbling with a few CDs, she decided to listen to yet more Mœnia to calm down. "No sería a tí, no sería a tí, esta vez ya no sería a tí, no supiste dar lo que yo te di, no supiste ver lo que hay en mí," she sang off-key to her favorite song, *Manto Estelar*. Her instant messenger also activated and once she got past the long boot-up, she began to check all of her messages. "Swing formation practice, international workshop, VCSARS meeting, SpecNet working group meeting," she mumbled as she ran through her e-mails. "And yet another correction to the hand-out for Dr. Qiu's class... and Albert complaining about that ecology class and how he'd rather have us doing Ceroc instead of Jive in the swing formation."

Lurker: =D

Manto_Estelar: *poke*

Lurker: Hey, no poking!

Manto_Estelar: lol. so how's things going? i just got home from seminar.

Lurker: Damn, same overbearing slave-driver professor?

Manto_Estelar: yeah... missed ya while i was surviving those midterms

Lurker: You'll make it and I'll make sure you don't get too stressed when you get here!

Manto_Estelar: in the meanwhile tho, could you help me keep my stress levels down? ;-)

Lurker: Sure... Where's Chaetodipus? I could use a bit of adventure.

"That Thomas guy... he's always fun," thought Joanne two hours later after chatting with the one known as Lurker. She sighed, wondering if she would ever meet the mysterious boy. Then her cell phone went off yet again with another obnoxious ring-tone, this time based on O-Zone's "Despre Tine", indicating that it was probably someone in her research lab or one of her fellow officers in Gamma Theta Upsilon. She groaned again and it was only the thought of going to the Arroyo and the fun of role-playing that kept her from collapsing.

That night, Joanne drove out to the Arroyo Seco from her Pasadena apartment with her trusty white maple recurve bow and quiver of arrows. Unlike a typical night in Pasadena, CA, it was dark without the usual air or light pollution and the only light was from the stars. As she waited, she noticed that there was a meteor shower when none had been expected, and it looked as if a meteor would strike her. It was certainly a beautiful night and the meteor shower began to pick up in brightness, intensity, and coloring as well.

Where was the strange eagle-woman? She grew a bit anxious, wondering if coming out to the Arroyo was such a good idea. For some reason, she felt like making a wish. "I wish I could be somewhere without worries, where I don't have to be so overloaded in a land like Sildavia. I wish I could find Sildavia and go there and never have to worry about another SpecNet project or GIS class or dealing with Dr. Oechel over at San Diego State University and just have

the adventure of a life, where I can become Soronthrel Cuthalión forever.” Even as she made the wish, she could hear the song in her mind, but only a brief moment. An especially large meteorite that glowed silver in the night sky seemed to be approaching her, and thinking it was only an illusion, she merely looked up, watching its trajectory. Only when it became obvious that it would actually hit her did she think of moving, but her reflexes were too slow. The ball of cold light struck her straight in the chest, sending her staggering backwards. She clutched her chest, fearing injury, but the pain quickly vanished. A sense of coldness and shock passed through her, centered on her chest but spreading throughout and then she felt something warm, fluttering, and somewhat squishy in her hand.

In a flash of light, the bow began to glow and another ball of light struck it, causing it to shimmer with an iridescent light. She gasped when she felt the warm, fluttering object floating towards the bow, which also floated on its own before her. ”My heart!” she gasped when she realized what had just come out of her chest and was being absorbed into her trusty bow. As it took her heart, the bow continued to glow more and more brightly until silvery runes began to appear. The emptiness in her chest became even more acute once the meteor shower faded away and she was surrounded by the usual Pasadena hazy gloom once more. ”I’m hallucinating, I’ve been reading too many fairy tales again!” she thought. ”It’s all a weird dream from too much coffee and working with too many spectra!”

Dizziness overtook her and right before she fell into the shadows, the eagle-woman’s voice filled her mind. ”Soronthrel Cuthalión, Dunhèasa awaits you. Uphold the way of the Eternal Hunt, and you shall enter Dunhèasa in seven years when you become one with the Sidhe.”

After that night, tae kwon do never seemed to be so easy as Joanne practiced her kicks and both her Palgwe and Taeguk forms. Somehow, she was able to launch her kicks with greater speed and precision, especially when it came to countering her opponents’ moves and striking the paddles and the punching bags. In her forms, she moved with authority, power, and snap. The instructor, Donny, had noticed Joanne’s gradual but somewhat drastic improvement as she prepared for the test to go from orange to green belt. ”Much better, Joanne. Those exercises really helped, didn’t they?” he called out as she practiced her Taeguk form with her fellow orange belts.

”Definitely. Thanks again, those roundhouse kicks and going off the ground combinations are much easier now,” she replied, smiling.

In the sparring portion of the class, Joanne not only evaded the fast, aggressive kicks from the higher belts, but she even countered with uncharacteristically graceful attacks. This time, she was sparring with one of the red belts who was unusually aggressive and accurate in his kicks. Unlike usual, she launched her own high punches, hook kicks, and spinning kicks to counter his powerful front and axe kicks. Her sliding side kicks, once slow and low, reached greater heights and struck him square in the chest before he could even block. All the while, Joanne felt a strange sense of joy rush through her veins with every strike.

In the meanwhile, Joanne also trained heavily in archery and she found that the thirty pound bow was extremely easy for her to draw tirelessly. At one point, she allowed one of her fellow archers to draw the bow only to watch him strain from the weight of the draw to even get about half-way. Then she weighed the draw to find that it had gone up to over eighty pounds and was increasing as she grew stronger. Like her strength, her aim was also improving as her groups tightened until she began to strike her own arrows consistently.

At first, the other archers chalked it up to diligent practice, but once they noticed her unusual accuracy and draw weight despite her five foot four height and fine bones, they began to talk amongst each other. The animals avoided her at first, but as she continued to practice,

many began to approach her and watch her shoot. On occasion, a hawk or falcon would land on her shoulder and whisper something to her. Sometimes it was just a greeting, sometimes a hint on how to improve her shooting or knowledge of nature. Thus Joanne grew more and more familiar with the land and came to be known to the animals around her as Soronthrel Cuthalión.

”Just think, you’ll soon be in a land covered in wilderness, greener than anything you’ve ever seen with water that glistens with the reflection of a pure blue sky,” said a small hawk that had perched on her shoulder one day. ”You’ll never grow old or weak in Dunhèasa and you’ll always be free to roam about and to hunt. You’ll never have to deal with another long-winded meeting or you’ll be able to find true love or not as you see fit without any social expectations. It’s a true paradise, far beyond your wildest dreams. And the queen of the land, Cylithera Eaglestrike, welcomes those who seek solace from the toil of this world. You’ll forget all your pains and worries there. It’s a pleasant and welcome vision with all of the trees and mountains and rivers. Aye, I miss Dunhèasa. I’ll go back there once my hatchlings are strong enough to fly and we’ll not return to this barren place again.”

Even with her growing stronger physically and meditating nightly in anticipation of becoming one of the Sidhe, she continued her life as a student working as hard as possible under the watchful eyes of Dr. Qiu and Dr. Gamon with extra mentoring from her statistics instructor, Dr. Killian Ying. In less than a year after spending many hours in front of a computer running models, she was able to publish a paper regarding the robustness of the continuum corrected water absorption features. She also developed an iterated empirical evapotranspiration model that integrated light-use efficiency, spectral signatures, and micro-meteorological data for her thesis. She even found herself ready to move on to graduate school, and all the while, she could only think of Dunhèasa. It wasn’t quite the Sildavia that Moenia sang about or the Neverland that she read of in J. M. Barrie’s masterpiece, *Peter Pan*, but based on what she had dreamed of and heard from the birds, Dunhèasa was still somewhere she would rather be than in Los Angeles.

3 Night-Falcon, Knight-Errant

Soronthrel Cuthalión listened closely to the chill night wind while her left hand gripped her bow even more tightly. Ever since that day when the Rift formed and loosed the entities from beyond the Veil, she had dedicated her life to that of a knight-errant. Known only as the Night-Falcon, she roamed from town to town along the roads and the wilderness, providing assistance as needed. Always, she was ready to lend her bow and skill as a huntress or a guide to those in need or even a mercenary if the situation warranted it.

The Rift had somehow formed almost four years ago when she was at the Ecological Society of America conference in Raleigh, North Carolina. One evening, when she had decided to take a break from going to all the talks about SpecNet, she had walked out into one of the many forest corridors at North Carolina State University. Then all of a sudden, an explosion of light filled the air and lightning bolts from the south streaked across the sky. From that day forth, strange creatures, mostly in the form of giants, terrorized the American continent as they spread out from the Rift. Not even the United States military, one of the finest in the world, could hold the giants in check as they wreaked havoc in the cities. Only one, Senator Joseph Mathers of Texas, was able to lead a group of people known as the Crusading Promise Holders who were able to fight the giants back with religious fervor. For those who did not have support from the Crusading Promise Holders, it was up to knight-errants like Soronthrel to protect them from the giants and the ghostly creatures that haunted the newly restored wilderness. She

knew there were other knight-errants about, but they were rare and fairly reclusive by nature. Granted, under Mathers' regime, knight-errants were seen as outlaws and anyone who did not conform to the Crusading Promise Holders' ideals was persecuted. Soronthrel shook her head, returning to the task at hand and reminding herself that a knight-errant's work was usually done alone even if there was a network of some sort.

That night, she was focusing on both the wind and some huge footprints that had marred the ground. "Giant," she mumbled, noting the glow on her trusty recurve bow she had long named Telcontar. "And apparently nasty ones," she thought as their thundering footsteps echoed in the distance. Silently, she willed herself to transform into a falcon to observe them a bit more closely before deciding on a course of action. Silver feathers sprouted from her skin and covered her entire body while her arms turned into long, tapered wings. In a burst of light and feathers, she took to the air.

The dim glow of distant fires and the smell of ashes jolted Soronthrel out of her reverie and she could hear both screams of terror and gravelly laughter. Flying towards the fires, she could see more clearly that the frightened villagers had burned a significant portion of their own town in hopes of deterring the giants from their merciless raid. Now she could see what type of giants were assaulting the town; their frosty blue skins and white furred loincloths revealed their identities as giants from the land known as Vladivostok. "Time to eat roast human!" bellowed one of the five brutes eagerly. "I call first dibs for the brains!"

"Not like they'll make you any smarter," laughed another, brandishing a spiked club. "The legs tickle my fancy much better. More meat."

"We got company!" roared one, a tall, long-haired female with a glowing staff with a human skull mounted on it. She raised a long-fingered, nimble hand and in a flash of lightning, her massive form shrank into that of a white-feathered owl with a hauntingly beautiful humanoid face with piercing blue eyes.

Soronthrel merely smiled inwardly at the prospect of a challenge. She soared upwards and willed herself to have both arms and a humanoid face again. The feathers receded a bit from her face and hands, but she was still mostly falcon. Energy began to pool in her fingers and she hovered high above the slower but still formidable and swift snowy owl. Once the owl was drawing close, she loosed a deep orange-red bolt of fire that crackled with electricity from her fingers. The owl instantly resumed a half humanoid shape and waved a blue-skinned hand, causing Soronthrel's bolt to fizzle into rainbow sparks. The owl-giantess then hurled a pale white spear at Soronthrel, who merely flew above it before diving, talons first.

Far below, the giants were cheering loudly at the battle. "Time for a bit of fun," thought Soronthrel as she willed her wings away and summoned her bow and quiver of arrows. In a flash, Soronthrel's talons struck home on the slower owl. As soon as she caught the owl, she drew her bow, aimed, and then loosed her arrow into the owl. With a shriek, the owl transformed back into a giantess and began to fall from the air. Sneering, she motioned to the falcon-woman.

"I know you, heartless and soul-less one. I shall return to Vladivostok to rejoin my ancestors, while you, heartless one, will merely be consumed by your foul Sidhe mistress, never to be remembered by any. Unlike you, I have an immortal soul that will rise once more," she gasped before her crystal clear blue eyes glazed over in death.

Without the owl-giantess to deal with, Soronthrel resumed her human form and slowly floated back down to the ground, bow in hand. Wordlessly, she loosed her lightning-wreathed arrows at the giants, who hurled large objects, including rocks and spears, in her direction, hoping to strike the one who slew their leader. Dodging this way and that, Soronthrel wove about, shooting as the opportunity allowed her. One by one, the giants fell at the mercy of her lightning-wreathed arrows, but not before one especially large and cruelly grinning giant struck

her in the arm with a huge boulder.

She shrieked in pain and the lone giant smirked, knowing a wounded archer was relatively harmless. As he charged at her with his gigantic spear that glowed with a sickly green light, Soronthrel allowed her mind to drift completely into the Ranger. The pain, once sharp and acute, faded away into a minor and annoying ache and she felt fire coursing through her veins once more. As the Ranger, pain did not exist in her vocabulary, and she was able to think clearly once more. Nocking an arrow to her bow, she took aim at this final giant and fired the arrow in one fluid motion. It merely hesitated at the searing pain, and when it tried to skewer the young woman, she stepped aside, nocked yet another arrow, and fired straight and true into its chest, causing frothy pink and lavender blood to spew forth all over. Even in its greatly weakened state, it still tried to strike her with its spear, but Soronthrel, in her Ranger mind-set, was too quick and eager to kill. Once she delivered a killing shot to its skull, she felt her own blood run cold and the pain became stronger until she could just barely hang onto consciousness.

The sound of a human male crying for help brought her back from the darkness again and despite the pain, she searched for the source of the voice. It was buried amidst the rubble that the giants had created, and once more forcing all thoughts of pain out of her mind, she dug until a tall, young man crawled out. Aside from a few scratches and bruises, he was uninjured, and just as he was about to thank her, Soronthrel found herself completely unable to stay conscious and her hand wandered to a rapidly growing warm, wet spot on her shattered arm. Besides feathers and claws on her wounded arm, there was also a scratch with a sickly greenish cast to it. She heaved a heavy sigh and used what little strength was left in her to resume complete human form again, which had become much more difficult in the last few months. Then all went dark and the young man carried her away to safety.

She woke up to the feeling of a heavy blanket being dropped on her. "Where am I?" she asked groggily, still too weak to focus her blurry vision. All she could make out was a person and a darkened room.

"Dunnellon, Florida," replied a male voice. "And we thank you for your courageous act last night. Without you, we would have fallen to those beasts."

Tentatively, Soronthrel began to sit up and examine her wounded arm. It was fully human again and it still hurt where a small scar remained from the poisoned spear. She saw a faint green aura on it and let out a sigh. Next to her was her bow and sword. She breathed a quick sigh of relief, then said, "And my thanks to you for tending to my wounds when I succumbed to my own injuries."

Smiling, the old man said, "It wasn't me, but Thomas, the local handyman. He was up all night taking care of you and I had to chase him out just now so he could at least rest for a bit. He didn't want to leave your side."

"And I'm back at your side. Thought we lost you," called out a second voice that belonged to a young, muscular, broad-shouldered man with a crooked smile and a confident air. "Why don't you stay here until you're strong enough to travel again?" She noticed several scars on his arm that looked like old needle marks.

"Thank you." She slowly began to look around the room, but her eyes never left the young man for long, and for a split second, their gazes met, but both of them turned away shyly.

After the old man stepped out and left the young man alone with her, he knelt next to her and smiled. "By the way, I'm Thomas."

"Soronthrel Cuthali3n," she replied slightly nervously. She saw the light on her trusty bow pulse and flutter, and for the first time in over four years, she felt an acute emptiness inside

her chest. Why did he look so familiar?

"Beautiful name, almost sounds like something from Tolkien." Before she could do anything else, Thomas took her injured hand and gently caressed it. "Does it still hurt?" he asked, examining the wound closely for anymore injuries that he might've overlooked in his haste and in pain from his own injuries. His dark eyes lit up when she nodded that nothing else hurt. "Hey, I can tell that you're really strong and that you're really cool," he said after making sure everything was all right. "You remind me of someone I used to chat with all the time, Joanne de Salvo. I haven't heard from her since the monsters came about. She's probably Dr. de Salvo by now and a professor at Caltech or Stanford and probably forgot all about me."

A sudden blush emerged in her tanned skin at Thomas' comments. No words formed in her mouth as she bolted up in shock. For a brief instant, she felt feathers ready emerge on her limbs and she could feel her body shifting a bit, but nothing more than a shiver passed through her as she willed herself to remain human. "It's a bit cold," she lied, trying to make sure Thomas' attention got diverted from the pulsing light surrounding her bow.

"Or rather, you're burning up," commented Thomas as he placed his large, meaty hand on her forehead. "I'll get something for the fever." He rummaged around in his pockets before he pulled out a small bottle from his vest pocket. Then he took the small cup of water next to the bed and handed it with two white tablets. "It'll make you very sleepy, but after those injuries and that poison, you'll need more rest to get better."

Reluctantly, Soronthrel accepted the pills that Thomas had given her after a sharp, shooting pain in her arm made her almost double over. All the while, Thomas remained at her side and provided her with a bit of support with his powerful arms. Once she swallowed the pills, the pain disappeared and she felt sleep overtake her.

"You must leave Dunnellon once you have the strength to walk," commanded a woman's voice that Soronthrel recognized as that of Cylithera Eaglestrike.

"What's happening to me? Why did I feel so strange in his presence?" asked Soronthrel.

"That is something you must forever leave behind. That man, Thomas Held, is a danger to you. He is one consumed by lust and drugs, and he seeks to corrupt you..."

"But he was kind to me and saved my life that night..."

"His curse drives him to corrupt and he wants to keep you here, never to enter Dunhèasa."

A cloud of smoke clouded her as she whirled about searching for the source of Cylithera's voice. Then the smoke vanished to reveal a somewhat overweight, dark-haired young woman hunched over a computer with a large pile books and papers about nonlinear dynamics and evapotranspiration next to her. "Was that me?" gasped Soronthrel, puzzled and trying to recall something. "Did that really happen? Was I that pathetic?" she spat. "Or is this a future I have to avoid?"

For a week, Soronthrel remained in the shelter, allowing her arm to mend. That dream still lingered in her mind, as did the name Joanne de Salvo. Why did it sound so familiar? She concentrated for a while and vaguely remembered it as a past identity she once assumed and had discarded. "I am Soronthrel Cuthalión, the Night-Falcon, a Knight-Errant and a petitioner of Dunhèasa, where I will forever be part of the Eternal Hunt," she told herself.

During that week, she concealed her bow, fearing Thomas' motives if he knew about the bow. Every time she saw him, she kept a close eye on him, scrutinizing every motion he made. In return, he merely tried to smile at her and help her whenever possible. Once, she wasn't able to open the door and carry a jug of water simultaneously because of her arm injury, and Thomas held the door for her so she wouldn't have to use her injured arm. She merely nodded

in thanks and hurried away, trying to conceal a hint of a smile and a more noticeable blush in her face. "No, I cannot allow that to be," she thought, realizing that she was indeed blushing.

At the end of the week, she was examining her arm and hefted her bow, then after successfully hefting it, she tried her sword. "It is time," she breathed to herself, noting that there was no more sickly green glint to the injured site. Hastily, she began to gather her few belongings, including her bow, which continued to pulse with a faint light.

Just then, Thomas stepped in and gasped when he saw that she was no longer wearing the makeshift sling and was packing her belongings. "But your arm..." he started before she interrupted him with a harsh, falcon-like glare.

"Healed. I must return to my duties. You have my gratitude for saving my life," she said stiffly before walking away. Thomas merely watched her in confusion, wondering how she could have healed so quickly. Yes, he had seen her transform that night, both into a falcon and back into a human, but he still couldn't comprehend how she could have regenerated so fast.

When she reached the edge of Dunnellon, she looked around to make sure she wasn't being followed, then she willed herself into the form of a falcon. As she transformed, she felt her bow fluttering oddly and for the first time in years, she felt a nagging sensation in her mind that brought back memories of those names again. Joanne de Salvo and Thomas Held. "No, it is not that. He's a demon, and I can't ever feel anything towards him," she thought. For some reason, that image of the tall young man lingered in her mind even when she had flown away.

4 Captain Greywolf

She had no idea how long she had flown ever since she departed from Dunnellon, but all she could recall was the gradient in the vegetation from sub-tropical forest to desert to various shades of chaparral and finally to a mixture of redwoods and chaparral. Along the flight, she had sustained herself on the various small birds and insects that presented themselves before her. Throughout her flight, it was all the same – settlements and cities that were either relatively intact from the influence of the Crusading Promise Holders or ruins from cities that had resisted Senator Mathers' declarations. Occasionally, she would spot a giant, but the restless urge egged her on and the memory of the young man in Dunnellon still burned in her mind.

"Dunhèasa," she thought. "I will get there. I must not think of him." She tried to force Thomas out of her mind, but nothing would completely remove him from her mind.

Finally she reached the sea, far to the west of where she had started, and below her was a city filled with high-rise buildings and a reddish-golden bridge that connected two peninsulas. Despite the restlessness, curiosity overtook her and she decided to land on a tall, white building on a lonely rocky outcropping on the northern end of the bridge. The strong winds threatened to push her back, but she continued on, determined to investigate whatever that was. Flapping her wings and fighting the powerful winds from the Pacific Ocean, she finally was able to perch on a rail on the building. There was a group of people, many in animal-styled attire or in outdoor clothing, gathered nearby in a room, including a man in his early thirties with what looked like tattered clothing and a grey jacket that had obviously seen better days, given all of the chemical stains on it.

"We're in better shape than the rest of the US," said the man with the tattered grey jacket. He was a short man of Latin descent with strong shoulders and a ruggedly handsome face that was accentuated by a slightly crooked nose and his dark hair that poofed out in the front with a few grey hairs poking out randomly. "At least we were smart enough to secede so frickin' Mathers can't persecute us so easy here. Greywolf and Sunshine have been doing a good job of hiding us."

A tall, slender ghostly pale twig of a man nodded but countered, "And that's why we have to keep fighting whenever we can. We need to do what we can to help the rest of the country that is under Mathers' rule." Then after he struggled to lift a case of ammunition, he shouted, "Could someone help me lift this?" Right away, a woman in a bobcat-like cloak and mask lifted the box and tossed it aside for him.

"Damn mage," mumbled the short man under his breath. "2-D is a more appropriate name than Scarecrow."

Soronthrel perked her keen avian ears up, intrigued at the progress of the conversation. There was a wolf-cloaked woman who seemed to be the leader of the group. It was hard to tell much about her beyond the fact that she was one of the shortest people in the group aside from two other women, one with a silk cloak with a fluffy red fox next to her and the other with a bobcat-like cloak. In total, there were a total of eight people, four women and three men. The fourth woman was large-framed and solidly built and of indeterminate age because of the wolverine mask she wore on her face, although Soronthrel guessed her to be somewhat older because of the traces of grey in her hair. The silk and the bobcat cloaked women were busily sharpening their swords, while the wolverine-masked woman was sorting through cases of ammunition and periodically tested the mechanisms on a few guns. All the while, the fox walked about, sniffing her and there and occasionally yapping at one of the men.

The wolf-cloaked woman suddenly turned at the sound of the cursing falcon-woman and shouted, "I saw you already, come over here!"

Grudgingly acknowledging the woman's keen senses and her own sloppiness, she leaped down towards her and saluted her. "Greetings! I am known as the Night-Falcon. Who are you to address me so?"

"And so we are not strangers, I am Greywolf. What news do you bring from afar?" asked Greywolf, removing her mask to reveal a pale but slightly tanned and weather-worn face. She had seen that face before, the thick gold-rimmed glasses that covered a pair of dark, almond-shaped eyes and that expression that spoke of quirks only a true nerd could have. No memories came to her mind, leaving her even more puzzled.

"Vladivostok giants in what was Dunnellon, Florida. I had to take care of some personally," replied Soronthrel, revealing the scar left from the spear on her arm. "But I think I routed them nicely." At this point, the short man's eyes widened at the mention of Dunnellon, Florida, but Greywolf merely nodded in acknowledgement.

Brik-Roc momentarily glared jealously at a tall, muscular man with short, brown hair who was entertaining himself by sorting out fishing tackle and placing them into a large box. "Not my fault," he said, smirking at Brik-Roc. "She and I just started talking one day, and hey, at least be grateful I'm not after your little ass!"

"Damn ogre," retorted Brik-Roc, tossing aside an empty box that once held broadheads and feathers for fletching. Sunshine, the silk-cloaked woman merely glared at the two men and then moved towards the radio in the corner of the room. She waved a CD labelled "Number One" with a picture of three effeminate young men on the cover threateningly at both of them. Both men's eyes widened significantly and then they went back to work, knowing the consequences of what Sunshine held in her hand. "Not the O-Zone!" cried Brik-Roc, crossing his fingers at Sunshine.

"Don't mind Brik-Roc and Moreth there," laughed Greywolf, watching the two men glare at each other before flexing their muscles at each other. "They're just being boys again. Even knight-errants have to have a bit of fun. Speaking of which, I've heard a handful of rumors about you, if indeed you are Night-Falcon that my spies told me about. Care for a friendly sparring match, one on one?"

At this point, Brik-Roc knowingly grinned at Greywolf, who cast aside her cloak and motioned for Soronthrel to transform completely back into a human. Grunting and struggling, Soronthrel willed the last of her feathers and falcon-like features away. Greywolf nodded teasingly to Moreth, who had whistled at both women, and waited for the younger woman to recover from the transformation.

"You're familiar with tournament-style tae kwon do, right?" asked Greywolf, tossing off her camouflage vest and her glasses to Moreth.

"Yes," replied Soronthrel, trying not to tense up too much while standing before the older woman. Both of them then stood about four feet apart from each other, bowed, then took up a ready stance with one leg back and one slightly bent in front.

Without any other words, Greywolf quickly charged up to Soronthrel, fists held up, while Soronthrel circled, keeping an eye on Greywolf's defense and holding up her own fists and keeping her elbows close to her body. Letting out a fierce yell, Greywolf leaped deftly, cocked her left leg and launched a swift and powerful side kick to Soronthrel's chest, sending her staggering for a moment. While Greywolf recovered her balance, Soronthrel whirled about, delivering a solid kick to Greywolf's shoulder, snapping her leg at the last instant to slap her with her foot. "Grab her foot!" cheered Brik-Roc, looking up from mixing some chemicals. "Remember how to jam those tae kwon do kicks!"

At one point, Soronthrel launched a front-snap kick with the intention of striking Greywolf's chin, but the older woman merely stepped aside, whirled about with cat-like grace and then delivered a quick back-kick with a backward thrust of her leg into Soronthrel's stomach. Enraged, Soronthrel ignored the pain and ran in, punching at Greywolf, who blocked most of the punches with both swift, soft blocks and powerful hard blocks before finally grabbing Soronthrel's wrists. Then Soronthrel struck her opponent's thighs repeatedly with her knees at full strength.

For a moment, Greywolf couldn't move either of her legs, and that moment allowed Soronthrel to strike her with both her elbows and deliver two swift front-snap kicks, one to her stomach and one to her chin. Still staggering a bit, Greywolf let out an almost canine growl and then jumped and turned quickly to deliver a flying spinning hook kick, only to miss Soronthrel, who had stepped aside and launched a high side-kick to Greywolf's hip. The older woman fell to the ground and then in a flash a light, Soronthrel's arms began to sprout silver feathers and she grappled her, keening like a falcon all the while. Right as she pounced on her, Greywolf twisted about and returned to her feet with a grace that rivalled most felines. Surprised at the turn of events, Soronthrel found herself on the receiving end of a side-kick followed up by a hook-kick to her chest.

A gasp escaped from Soronthrel when she felt the urge to bite and scratch at Greywolf and she shrieked when her nails extended into claws. "Stop..." she said. "I'm losing control."

Greywolf made one more round-house kick to Soronthrel's side and then went back into her ready stance. "You fight very well and with your heart," said Greywolf, not minding the cuts and bruises on herself. "Are you all right?" she asked, noting Soronthrel's pained expression.

Stopping to catch her breath, Soronthrel concentrated as hard as she could to will the claws back to nails and to remove the few feathers that sprouted from her arm. "Oh, I should be all right," she gasped, clutching her arm. "Great fight, sorry about going out of control."

Turning to the men and women who were working busily on various tasks, Greywolf shouted, "If anyone needs me, just send Sunshine down to knock on my office door. I have something to take care of." Then to Soronthrel, she said, "Come with me, I wish to speak with you."

Eager replies of "Yes, Captain!" filled the air. Soronthrel then followed Greywolf down the long, twisty flight of stairs down to what looked like a small shack on a large rock near the

ocean. In Soronthrel's mind, any lower, and the shack would be knocked over by the constant pounding of the waves.

"What do you want of me?" demanded Soronthrel, confused at Greywolf's behavior.

"I see something in you that I can't stay quiet on but I can't talk about in front of everyone else," replied Greywolf over the pounding waves before motioning to the door, which opened on its own. The office was a cluttered room filled with books, notes, papers, and several bows and arrows. Despite the tenacious grip the building had on the land, the inside suggested that it was more of a secure cave on a foundation of solid stone with the firm walls and the rugged ceiling. "Pardon the mess," she laughed when Soronthrel almost tripped over a large can of coffee on the ground. "I don't let anyone in here, except Sunshine to work on the enchantments to protect this site from the Senator and his cronies. Not even Moreth, my scouting and hunting partner, or Brik-Roc, the head chemist, are allowed in here."

Taking care not to get her buttocks or back impaled on anything, Soronthrel sat on a large wooden chair with only a small blue pillow for cushion, while Greywolf pulled up a music stool to sit on. She then motioned for Soronthrel to hand the bow to her. Reluctantly, she passed the bow over, half-expecting the mysterious woman to leap back in shock or explode into thousands of tiny fragments. The bow began to glow brightly in protest at being handled by someone else and then the silver ring that was on a silver chain around Greywolf's neck began to float and glow, as if in response. "I know your secret, Soronthrel, but don't worry, it's safe with me," she said almost menacingly yet reassuringly. She then pointed to a recurve bow that was hanging on the wall to emphasize her point. It was a take-down recurve with an ovankol riser with imbuya and maple highlights and black walnut limbs.

"What would one like you know of me besides rumors?" demanded Soronthrel, almost growling. "And what would you know of the Eternal Huntress and of Dunhèasa?"

"I once made a pact with the Eternal Huntress to do what you seek to do now, to enter Dunhèasa, but instead I re-discovered the path of knowledge after years of grief and anger. There's much to be learned about this world, and think again when the Eternal Huntress calls to you," said Greywolf, clutching the ring.

"You mean you gave up that opportunity to deal with all this stuff with what's going on now and willing to risk persecution or worse from Senator Mathers and his bunch?" asked Soronthrel, puzzled.

"I wouldn't say give up. I just couldn't turn my back on those in need when the Rift formed, or even long before, when I saw hope in a few courageous people, some of whom are now fellow knight-errants. As much as the Eternal Huntress curses at me, she can't really do anything about me because I'm not in her grasp anymore, I have my human soul back and have another human soul bound to it," she said, offering Soronthrel some coffee. One sip of it made Soronthrel cough and splutter. "Strong, eh?" laughed Greywolf, drinking it as if it were fruit juice.

"A bit too much," wheezed Soronthrel, still coughing and trying to get the taste of the super-concentrated coffee out of her mouth. "But it just seems odd that you'd give up those powers when it was given to you freely."

"Not really. My powers are just in a different form, at first the powers tried to take over me, but I mastered them. Don't take me wrong, it's not that I fought for complete control or anything, but rather I found a middle-ground between what the Eternal Huntress wants of me and what I want of myself. It will be a difficult task for you, but you will be able to do it. Just remember, though, if you give in to the hate and anger that the Eternal Huntress advocates, she will take complete control over you and you will forget that you were ever human or that you had a name besides the one she gave you. Yes, you will become Sidhe, but is it worth

giving up the joys of being human to become immortal?" She poured herself another cup of the super-strong black coffee and then willed her ring to stop glowing. Before Soronthrel could respond, Greywolf began to transform into a gigantic grey wolf but resumed her human form in a flash.

Looking puzzled, Soronthrel merely nodded, took her bow back, and then tightened her grip. "No, I only seek to enter Dunhèasa and serve the Eternal Huntress, and I have come close to completing my time of penance."

"Just think of what I've told you when the time comes. Not all is as it seems," said Greywolf, downing yet more coffee. "In fact, if you don't mind, let me tell you my story for inspiration."

Braving another sip of Greywolf's coffee, she replied, "Let me hear your story. I already know my path, but something in me tells me that I should at least listen." Soronthrel ignored the urge to strike at the older woman as she grabbed her scarred arm, which had been twitching and sprouting a few feathers.

Leaning back in the chair, Greywolf began to tell her story. "I was once a seemingly ordinary nerdy student but for some reason I kept having dreams of the wilderness and of the Eternal Huntress. I thought I was going crazy from too much stress because I was a student at Caltech. One quarter, when things got really bad because I had an awkward situation with a male, struggled to pass a few classes, and a dangerous research project involving uranium sorption on montmorillonite clay, I suddenly had a vision of the Eternal Huntress, who directed me to ride my bike around campus. Then I hit something and it got lodged in my bike tire, and when I checked it out, it was a silver ring, the very one you see right now."

At that moment, Soronthrel's eyes widened in surprise at Greywolf. "You? A former Caltech student?" she dared to gasp.

Laughing a bit, she continued. "Hard to believe, isn't it? But I found myself heeding the call of the Eternal Huntress and seeking to redeem my honor for over a year and a half, never resting and always denying my humanity. I then found a brief respite from the call of Dunhèasa when I ran into Brik-Roc, that little guy obsessed with organic synthesis, at Caltech. He humbly approached me and asked if I knew chemistry and calculus. Part of me wanted to give in to the power of the ring and ignore him, but part of me also just wanted to give him a hand in his studies. In teaching him, he helped me resist the call of the ring and made me realize that there was another way and that there was hope in humans. He also led me to go back to school to seek out further knowledge because I was so burned out and weary of the world after my time at Caltech."

Again, Soronthrel gasped in surprise but no words escaped from her mouth. She had unconsciously let go of her scarred arm once it stopped twitching, but this time, her hand instinctively went to the handle of her bow and gripped it tightly.

"But that peace only lasted for about three years and I was getting ready to enter graduate school. A shadow suddenly came over me, and once again, I felt the ring calling to me from beyond those shadows. At the same time, I met a young man who spoke of life outdoors, of a simple life that revolved around fishing, the farm and hard physical work, but at the same time, he had an aura of mystery and adventure about him. Moreth reminded me that there was a world beyond the research lab and academia and that I was still human, even if Brik-Roc and my collaborators were trying to get me to think that scientists are something inhuman. The ring called out to me again and I was back on my way to entering Dunhèasa after a summer of penance. In the end, though, as I became my own person and balanced the calls of both Dunhèasa and academia, the Rift then occurred and I found myself thrust into the role of Captain Greywolf. But to be honest, I miss the days when I had everything I could've wanted: a secure position as a researcher in landscape ecology, time to go fishing or hunting or hiking,

and a dedicated companion.”

”It sounds like folly still,” said Soronthrel. ”I appreciate your efforts and that of the other knight-errants, but if I were you, I would have taken the opportunity to cast aside my human weaknesses permanently.”

”I actually did briefly become Sidhe and was ready to step into Dunhèasa in my darkest days of research, but between remembering Moreth’s story and seeing how my colleagues at Cal State LA rose up to meet their challenges, I chose to become human again. I couldn’t leave them behind because as a Sidhe, I would have completely forgotten myself and I would not have been able to help those whose works seek to understand and protect what’s left of the land.” Then she stood up and said, ”I think I’ve probably talked your ears off by now. Let’s go back up before Sunshine gets sent down here to make sure you didn’t try to kill me again or that my coffee didn’t kill you.” She opened the door, allowing sunlight to enter the room and lighting it up briefly. All the while, Greywolf smiled an optimistic, honest smile.

Stepping out from the crowded shack, Soronthrel looked up at the lighthouse that was up the stairs and then back into the cluttered shack. Greywolf followed her out, then smiled. ”By the way, please at least join us for the evening, I know you’re anxious to leave, but we’ll feel rude if you don’t stay the night and rest a bit. That was quite a flight you took by any stretch of the imagination.”

That evening, Soronthrel found herself seated at a long wooden table in a surprisingly large, spacious house that was partially above-ground, partially below-ground. ”This was once a military bunker,” explained Sunshine, putting a large organic chemistry book aside and creating a space on the floor for Soronthrel. ”And Brik-Roc, put your book away! We’ve got a guest, in fact, just come out of that little corner of yours! And I hope you cooked something real besides chemicals, even Sergeant Parakeet’s microwave cuisine is better than your chemicals.”

”Naw, I’ve got to keep my synthesis fresh in my head!” called out Brik-Roc from a corner that was far away from everyone. ”And it’s comfortable by the stove and oven!”

”Nerd,” mumbled Moreth under his breath, eyeing Brik-Roc, then Greywolf. She merely winked at Moreth before checking to make sure Soronthrel was comfortable.

”Ogre,” muttered Brik-Roc, just barely audible and glaring at Moreth.

”Where’s everyone else?” asked Soronthrel, noting she only saw a fraction of the group she had seen earlier.

”Various missions. Neko leads the outside infiltration team, the rest are with her to check to see what’s going on in San Francisco, there were rumors of Senator Mathers’ men out there,” replied Greywolf. ”She’s more than capable of leading and keeping the others out of trouble, especially when she has Quazar, our roving engineer, to help her out.” Then she motioned to Brik-Roc. ”Come on, even you have to eat, or you’ll be skinnier than Sunshine and Scarecrow!”

After a surprisingly satisfying dinner, Soronthrel found herself feeling unusually relaxed and Lily, the red fox that almost always stayed with Sunshine, curled up on Soronthrel’s lap. Absently petting the little fox, she looked around at the large room. ”I really appreciate this,” she said, admiring the way these knight-errants were able to sit together in the same room despite obvious tensions, particularly between Brik-Roc and Moreth.

”You really should stay with us,” said Brik-Roc, finally looking up from his books. ”You’re a really good fighter and you’re really smart. And you don’t have to go fight with the Senator’s morons by yourself. And I could teach you o-chem and ground fighting too.” He grinned slightly flirtatiously at Soronthrel, who winked back at him before making sure that Lily didn’t chew on the fletching on her arrows.

For the rest of that evening, Soronthrel found herself eagerly chatting with these knight-errants, although she kept her guard up, making sure not to reveal more than she felt was safe.

"Do not forget your mission, to become one of the Sidhe in Dunhèasa," persisted the Eternal Huntress' voice in her mind all evening, even when she gave Sunshine and Brik-Roc a hand in moving several large, heavy boxes across the shelter. All the while, Lily continued to follow her around and yapping nonstop.

As the evening grew later, Greywolf rummaged around in the make-shift shelter, searching for a blanket. "We all have our own little cubbies or rooms to sleep in, but we've got to find something for you. I don't think you'll exactly appreciate sleeping out here in the common room, unless you like being stepped on by tired knight-errants," she explained to Soronthrel, who watched Sunshine and Lily crawl into what looked like a fairly tight cubby-hole in the wall. Finally, Greywolf found a folding bed in a corner and opened it up for Soronthrel. "Here you go. Hopefully it'll be comfortable enough."

"Thank you. I really appreciate this," she said, testing the bed to make sure it wouldn't collapse under her weight. With the rest of the knight-errants going into their own private spots, Soronthrel curled herself up under the blanket with the bow next to her on the ground.

The next morning, after a quick breakfast that Brik-Roc cooked, Soronthrel walked up to the lighthouse again with Greywolf. "And one more thing," said Greywolf, extending her small, weatherworn hand out to her, which Soronthrel shook. "If you ever desperately need a hand and everything seems hopeless, just look to the west and at least one of us will be over to help you." After what was easily the most powerful handshake of her life, Soronthrel checked her hand to make sure that it was still in one piece. "By the way, besides being a great fighter and a real genius, you've got an awesome handshake," complimented Greywolf.

"And you've also got quite the handshake. Maybe next time we can spar again," replied Soronthrel, relieved at being allowed to leave but at the same time wishing she could spend more time with this mysterious woman who was so much like her yet the complete opposite.

"Remember, Soronthrel, no matter what you do, put your heart into it and all will be well," called out Greywolf to the swiftly transforming woman. With that, Soronthrel resumed falcon form and flew into the dawn, her silver feathers shining brightly in the rosy-gold light.

5 Time Grows Short

Soronthrel slumped back into her makeshift den, a small trailer on the edge of the city of Ocala that had been abandoned. Looking around in the faded light, she let out a heavy sigh. It had been over a year, almost two, since she had been able to truly rest, when she had been wounded and poisoned by that giant in Dunnellon. She could feel the toll of almost non-stop fighting against the giants and other creatures from the Rift, which seemed to be moving based on what the animals and the plants had told her. Warily, she looked into the cracked mirror and noted the lines of care on her face. "Only twenty-seven but you're looking much worse for the wear. Almost seven years, then I guess I'll be beyond caring what I look like," she said, trying to chuckle a bit to cheer herself up. "I guess Greywolf was right about how life as a hero does tend to do that. Actually miss her and that crowd of knight-errants, but my place is in Dunhèasa and the time's getting close."

Then she noticed that there were many silver feathers in her hair and around her face as well as her arms and legs. "I think I went a bit too far this time," she added, trying to will herself back to fully human form. Moaning and groaning, the feathers receded and she staggered to the couch that served as her bed, where she passed out from exertion.

"The time draws near. You are almost Sidhe and will not be slain upon entry into Dunhèasa when the transformation is complete. You have almost earned your way to Dunhèasa, where

you will finally find peace and be part of the Eternal Hunt,” whispered Cylithera’s voice in her mind. “Soon you will have completely cast aside the weak human shell.”

“How much more? Will there be an end to the fight against the Rift?” asked Soronthrel tiredly.

“Only a brief period more, then the Rift too shall close as you step into Dunhèasa.”

While she was trying to comprehend Cylithera’s words, a flicker of light nearby caught her attention. In the foggy aether, the light pulsated blurrily and a fuzzy image of Thomas and a wizened old crone formed.

“Her time is running out. Her heart was stolen by a fey creature, a stealer of souls and a hater of mortal men for what they have wrought upon her followers. Soon, Soronthrel the Night-Falcon will completely forget that she was ever mortal, that she was ever Joanne de Salvo, the one who stole your heart those years ago, and she will become Sidhe, a creature of Dunhèasa,” said the old woman.

“Dr. Ott, how could Joanne de Salvo and Soronthrel be the same person? And even if they were one and the same, they couldn’t turn into one of those creatures, she almost died saving Dunnellon!” protested Thomas.

“Thomas, I must explain many things to you. Do you remember the tapestry that once hung in here before the giants raided the place?” she asked, turning her milky eyes to him.

“Yes.”

“There is a prophecy that the Rift can be sealed off once more when the heartless learns to love once more and regains her heart and immortal human soul and the cursed one forgets his own curse,” intoned Dr. Ott. “She will resist, so intent is she on entering Dunhèasa and emulating her master, Cylithera Eaglestrike.” Unconsciously, Thomas began to fidget a bit and reaching into an empty pouch, as if from habit.

A ghostly image of Thomas began to solidify before her and he held out his hand to her. “Please, let me help you... I want you...” he said, smiling lustily even as she felt something pulsing inside of her chest.

“No!!!” screamed Soronthrel angrily. “I am Sidhe! I can never love a human again!” Even as she allowed herself to lose her human form, she shuddered a bit from a chill breeze. Almost unconsciously, she whirled about, searching for the source of the breeze. In her hands, her bow began to quiver a bit and glow with a red light. “You will not have me! I shall kill you, Thomas!” she roared. “I shall triumph over my human weakness and enter Dunhèasa!”

Iliiryana N’Shad-Daermon stood still until she was certain that Soronthrel was alone. Like the beasts she pursued, she knew her powers of hiding were limited until she adjusted to this strange world where the fey had been all but eradicated, save for a few bold (and foolish) Sidhe and Alfar. Although mortal, Iliiryana still felt the disconnect from the Veil, the result of her fey blood. The dusky-skinned maiden tied her silver hair back, then mentally willed the rusty door open. In the far end of the trailer, Soronthrel still knelt in meditation, that state known to the Sidhe as shadow-weaving, where they reflected upon their inner thoughts to strengthen their minds and bodies. Not all Sidhe did this, but those who chose to follow Cylithera Eaglestrike the Eternal Huntress were especially renowned for their deep introspection and unusual grace and clarity of mind as well as their deadly accuracy with their bows and fierce dedication to complete purity.

She too, like the one she sought to guide and learn from, sought to become a true Sidhe, unfettered by mortality. Had she been fully dhaerow, she would have already been among the Sidhe, but human blood made her mortal and fragile and prone to frequent emotional outbursts. As she watched the young woman meditate and practice her movements with the sword, she

noticed that her breathing grew faster, a sign of troubling thoughts. What could trouble one who was just barely hanging onto humanity and was willing and ready to cast it completely aside?

"What troubles you?" Iliiryana dared to ask, although she knew disturbing a fellow Sidhe in meditation invited an attack.

Whirling around, Soronthrel nocked an arrow and drew back the bow in a single, graceful and fluid motion. "Who dares disturb me?" she demanded in a slightly hoarse voice, her deep brown eyes flashing an angry gold for an instant. A few more silver feathers sprouted on her wrist and hands.

"One who seeks to learn the way of the land and one to hasten your entry into Dunhèasa," replied Iliiryana, crossing her dark arms across her chest and putting her scimitars down at Soronthrel's feet before kneeling. After witnessing the short, ebon-skinned woman's movements, she felt the uncertainty leaving her and she eased the tension on her bow, no longer aiming it at her.

Still somewhat confused and looking at Iliiryana cautiously, she motioned for her to stop kneeling and to take a seat on the couch, which she dusted off slightly. "Pardon my rude greetings," said Soronthrel, recalling a human past briefly and losing her menacing aura. "I've had much on my mind and no amount of shadow-weaving has helped me."

The older woman leaped up, startled at the sudden transformation. Was she still that mortal? Nonetheless, she took a seat on the couch while Soronthrel had poured out some water from a pitcher into a pair of cups. "Are you hungry or in need of anything else?" asked Soronthrel, noting the weary look on Iliiryana's face as well as the mismatched clothing, no doubt scavenged in confusion over what was considered non-descript.

"No, but tell me, what disturbs one like you?" she asked as she motioned for Soronthrel to come back out from the makeshift kitchen.

"I have been haunted in my mind by a young man..." began Soronthrel before Iliiryana coughed and spluttered.

"Then we must make haste, ere he corrupts you further and all the effort you put forth becomes naught!" hissed Iliiryana agitatedly.

Soronthrel nodded in agreement. "I don't understand. I have no heart but I feel strange, almost as if I have a longing to see him again..."

"Then I have not arrived a moment too soon. I shall delay my own journey to Dunhèasa if need be to make sure you do not lose your own opportunity to the curse of a demon like this strange man you speak of."

Thomas hid in the bushes not far from the trailer he had identified as Soronthrel's. "You're too much of a charmer to let go..." he thought. Then he turned his attention to the small vial Dr. Ott had given him.

"One taste will render you unseen, unheard, unfelt, un-sensed," echoed Dr. Ott's voice in his mind. "If you delay too long, her powers will consume her and she will be like her master, colder than a glacier, heartless, and dead to all but the Sidhe and other fey creatures that have long been eradicated from this world." He sensed the urgency in her voice and he gritted his teeth. For a moment, he wished that he had a dose of something, even if it was something as dangerous as PCP or meth, to give him the extra courage and energy.

Nervously, he allowed a tiny drop of the crystalline liquid onto his tongue and braced himself for the painful burning sensation that Dr. Ott's concoctions usually caused. Aside from a small tingle, nothing seemed to happen and he could still sense himself. Was something wrong? Before his mind even completed thoughts about a backup plan, he saw his shadow fade

into the moonlight and he could feel his body floating above the ground.

Still a bit doubtful, Thomas crept as best as his broad, six and a half foot tall frame allowed him to until he reached Soronthrel's window. In the trailer, he heard Soronthrel talking to a strange woman with very dark skin and long silver hair and well-worn overalls and a heavy jacket. While Soronthrel, now looking even more falcon-like and significantly older than her twenty-something years would indicate, was talking with the strange woman about Dunhèasa and the will of Cylithera Eaglestrike, Thomas entered the trailer through a crack in the side.

"What was that?" hissed the strange woman, leaping to her feet and her nails growing into mighty feline claws.

"Not sure, but I felt it too," replied Soronthrel, her eyes glowing an angry red-gold again. Her arm was now covered in feathers and her hands were almost claw-like.

Slowly, Thomas moved towards where Soronthrel had placed her bow and he prayed mentally that Dr. Ott hadn't made any mistakes in this potion. Gradually, the bow came closer and closer to his grasp as he crept onwards. Soronthrel and the strange woman, whose name was now revealed as Iliiryana, continued to talk until they began to gesture strangely and spoke in spidery languages. For a moment, Soronthrel completely transformed into a giant falcon with razor-sharp talons and Iliiryana became a panther that was large enough for him to use as a horse. While the woman was able to return to her usual form, Soronthrel struggled to resume even vaguely human form, and she groaned from the effort.

"Time grows short..." echoed Dr. Ott's raspy voice in his mind again.

With that, Thomas darted to the bow and grabbed it with a ghostly hand. Fire and electricity surged through his body, but he held firmly onto it even when the fire quickly turned into a piercing coldness that almost made his heart stop. A pulsing sensation, much like a heartbeat passed through him as well, and he tried to ignore the pain. "I'm sorry if it hurts," he apologized when he saw Soronthrel double over in pain and fall unconscious. He kissed her lightly on the forehead and then hastened his way out before Iliiryana could catch him.

6 Flight to Gainesville, FL

Soronthrel bolted up as Iliiryana shook her roughly to wake her up. "Wake up! There is little time!" commanded Iliiryana.

Soronthrel's eyes slowly opened as she let out a loud groan. "Thomas?" she called out, trying to figure out what was happening.

"Tell me, what visions did you see?" demanded Iliiryana, grabbing the young woman roughly and shaking her again. Her nails momentarily became feline claws before returning to normal.

"He was next to me and... he held me close... and he spoke of love and breaking a curse by giving me my heart and immortal soul back," babbled Soronthrel, confused. "And there was a joining of..."

"He has stolen your bow... and he has already poisoned you, then!" she spat angrily. "We must pursue him, ere he finds a way to lead you further on the path to ruin! You must kill him to be free of his curse!"

Shaking her head to clear the cobwebs from the dream, she leaped out of bed and stood up on wobbly legs. "That explained why I feel so odd, then, almost like this weird feeling in my chest..." She tried to will herself into falcon form, but she only found herself with a large headache. Then she saw that most of the feathers on her arms and face were shrinking and she felt something strange and hollow rustling in her chest, as if searching for something.

"That man has a stronger grip than I thought," hissed Iliiryana, concerned. She then began to transform into a giant raven with a feral yet intelligent expression. As the lithe muscular woman faded into a flurry of jet-black feathers, she stepped out of Soronthrel's trailer-hideout. "Come, ride on my back, you're too slow on foot," she commanded.

Nodding, Soronthrel leaped onto the giant raven and held on as best as she could. She almost lost her balance when Iliiryana began to flap her mighty black wings and soared into the growing, pink-tinged light. At first, she held on until her knuckles were white, but as Iliiryana's flight stabilized, she began to relax her grip. "Thomas is a tall young man with a sexy... er broad, muscular build, short brown hair, and he usually wears..."

Interrupting, Iliiryana said, "I see him. The bow reveals him to my eyes, no witch's brew can conceal anything blessed by the Eternal Huntress for long. He may have snuck away once, but he'll not do it again."

Far below, Thomas crawled into his rusty powder blue and grey primer mottled truck. "Start..." he mumbled as he fought with the ignition. "I need to outpace that bird that's been following me." He fidgeted with some wires again and the engine began to make spluttering choking noises combined with a few explosions before grunting and purring again. "Piece of crap Dodge pickup, start!" he cursed, holding the bow in his free hand. As he stepped on the gas pedal, the truck roared and sped forward.

Once the truck was certain to move, he grabbed the steering wheel and drove as fast as the cranky vehicle allowed him to. It was a bumpy ride and he regretted not having maintained the vehicle as well as he should've, but he knew he just had to beat the bird to Gainesville. The bow began to glow almost blindingly again. "Oh no you don't," he grumbled as he sighted the huge black bird with a rider on it. For a brief instant, he considered pulling out his rifle, but he realized that the bird was too far and the rider might be Soronthrel herself.

"Thank goodness you're light," said Iliiryana as Soronthrel sighted the truck. Even as a mighty raven, she felt the weight of her passenger and she began to sweat.

"Thank goodness your flight is stable," laughed Soronthrel, keeping a keen eye on the rusty powder-blue and primer grey truck. "I think he's heading back to Dunnellon..."

"Or Gainesville, where the Rift has now moved to," interrupted Iliiryana. "If he can figure out how to close the Rift with the bow, neither of us will be able to get to Dunhèasa and we'll have to live here as mortals."

A small sigh sneaked out from Soronthrel's lips and she shook her head. "Dunhèasa or an undying soul. Tradeoffs to think about, but I made my promise and I have sought to join the Eternal Hunt that night. And I don't think I could live in a world that's being run by Senator Joseph Mathers and the Crusading Promise Holders. I'm not anything like Greywolf, I couldn't do that..."

"Don't think of an undying soul, it is but a trick to lure you into the path that Thomas has locked himself into. That thing the mortals call an undying soul is passive and the result of hedonistic lifestyles and an obsession with a dead man that the Crusaders keep talking about. Yes, there are lies that you can gain the false thing they call an undying soul through things like love, good works, or even accepting a false prophet and a false god as your ultimate savior, but it is only in Dunhèasa with the Eternal Huntress that you can gain true immortality," said Iliiryana sternly. "And as for Greywolf, she is a fallen Sidhe, not to be trusted fully. Speak not of her in my presence!"

The truck began to emit large clouds of grey and blue smoke before grinding into a screeching halt. Far below, both women could see Thomas' muscular form dart out of the truck with the

bow. Iliiryana soared down, almost losing her rider, had she not held on with all of her strength. Her stomach felt light and she hoped the raven would not mind if her passenger vomited. "No, I must continue on to Dunhèasa," thought Soronthrel, trying to block all thoughts of her stomach and Thomas.

While she held on for life, Iliiryana added, "You must kill him and let his warm blood flow upon you. Only then will the thoughts and dreams end. Yea, let his warm blood flow and never again will he torment you, for you will be free of your heart."

After several attempts to restart the truck, Thomas roared and cursed in frustration before stepping out of the truck to see what was wrong. The smoke from the engine grew thicker and began to choke him. A few spluttering gurgles emerged from the hood and the grey smoke became highlighted with black clouds. Thomas debated whether or not it was worth the trouble to repair the vehicle. To be safe, he removed the bow, which burst into blue flames in his hands, yet it did not consume the bow. His hand, however, caught fire and he let go, shocked. "Why the heck do I like you so much?" he asked of himself as the bow pulsed before him.

"Break the bow in Gainesville..." insinuated a voice in his head. "Then you can have all the women and drugs you want... you know you want some more cocaine, or maybe would you prefer a bit of heroin?" Thomas merely nodded and shrugged.

"No. I won't go back to those drugs, nor will I return to that life. Those days are over," he thought, gritting his teeth and grabbing the bow once more. "I need to make something better of myself. I don't want to become the flavor of the day in jail again!"

A second voice echoed in his mind. "Return the bow to Soronthrel Cuthalión, the one you once knew as Joanne de Salvo, and perhaps the Eternal Huntress will show you mercy..." For an instant, Thomas' grip loosened as pain overwhelmed him and memories of a fearsome-looking woman with an expression that froze his blood came back to his mind.

"I don't want to lose her... and I guess I do admit I want... But I also want to do what's best for her..."

"But would you hold her here against her will in this world to be pursued and persecuted by madmen like Crusading Promise Holders?" persisted the voice. "She seeks to enter Dunhèasa. Leave her be, human. Set her free if you truly love her."

The bird, now revealed to be a giant raven, soared down to where Thomas stood still, debating to himself. He was shocked out of his own thoughts by the raven's incessant cawing and Soronthrel's voice calling out to him. "Thomas! Hand me the bow!" she commanded, looking more like a fierce huntress than the knight-errant who had rescued Dunnellon only months ago.

"She is human too," thought Thomas before he held out the bow for Soronthrel to take. Perhaps the voice was right in that she was better off in this mysterious land he kept hearing of, yet he could feel a pulse of life and fear in the bow. What would he do when the time came? Calling out to Soronthrel who slowly dismounted from the bird and approached him, he shouted, "You may take the bow, but only if you let me come along to Gainesville! If not, I'll not hand the bow over!"

By then, the raven had faded back into her humanoid form and stood next to Soronthrel, who was grateful to be standing on both feet on solid ground again. "I'll kill you!" screamed Iliiryana, brandishing her scimitars and poised to strike Thomas, who merely held out the bow for Soronthrel.

"Do not kill him," intoned Soronthrel, looming slightly over Iliiryana. "I owed him my life and the debt is now erased." Then turning to Thomas, she said, "We will allow you with us, but should you betray us or put us in unnecessary danger, I shall personally slay you." Soronthrel's

normally placid features, already made feral by the enchantments of the bow, became even more falcon-like and authoritative and her dark eyes flared with a fierce light. A few feathers sprouted on her arms as Thomas handed the bow to her.

As soon as Soronthrel's hand closed on her trusty recurve bow, it glowed brightly and her human form faded instantly under a coat of silver feathers. Her face remained human aside from the round pupils becoming vertical. With a keening wail, she grew in size until she was large enough to carry Thomas in her talons. At the same time, Iliiryana resumed raven form and followed Soronthrel, keeping her sharp eyes on both her and the human she kept in her talons.

"What's going on? Joanne... er Soronthrel?" stuttered Thomas, clinging onto Soronthrel's talons and looking up at the monstrous creature she had become.

"It's the promise I made so I could break from academic politics and get out of the city and to find myself," she replied sadly over the wind. After a quick glance behind her to make sure Iliiryana was out of earshot, she continued. "I'm starting to have second thoughts about Dunhèasa for some reason... I don't know how to explain it..."

Far below, the ruins of Gainesville soon came into sight as did the newly built temple of the Eternal Huntress and the lights from several camps. Amidst the chaos, the silver-blue stone glowed like a beacon of hope and menace. "The gate to Dunhèasa..." thought Soronthrel.

Surrounding the fortress-temple were large armies of various entities including humans and giants. "What the hell?" asked Thomas as loudly as he dared.

"The Rift. The Eternal Huntress opened it in hopes of re-introducing the Sidhe and maybe even a few of the Alfar and restoring what was once the original Dunhèasa, but instead the beasts of Vladivostok took advantage," replied Soronthrel, diving despite the chaos below. Cries of pain, fear, and battle-lust saturated the air as the humans, giants, and Sidhe battled each other. "I am going to make us visible only to the Sidhe," she continued. "And then we will be among the Sidhe and finish this mess once and for all." With that, she whispered spidery words and Thomas could see himself become transparent. Then he felt something pierce his side, but so intent was he in observing what was going on that he didn't notice until things began to darken.

Iliiryana watched Soronthrel use the incantation she had taught her earlier in the day. She would definitely be a mighty warrior in Cylithera's service if she could prevent Thomas from returning her humanity to her. It was only a matter of time before she would deal with the mortal if Soronthrel lacked the Sidhe blood-thirst to kill Thomas. "His warm blood upon the bow shall seal the Rift and forever render Soronthrel as a true Sidhe, but should the bow break and he retrieves her heart, then she will be human once more..." recalled Iliiryana. "She will never be yours, human," she hissed. Then she, too, whispered the spidery incantation to allow herself to fade from mortal sight.

7 Battle at the Rift

Firianna Celethorn looked up into the darkening sky and set or bow down long enough to identify the two rapidly descending objects as Sidhe, probably Iliiryana N'Shad-Daermon judging from the black feathers, and the young human who held the power to shut the Rift. Her keen eyes also registered a third figure, a mortal, most likely a human male. A spear flew in her direction, forcing her to leap aside. In her powerful voice, she shouted to her fellow Sidhe at the wall, "Iliiryana and Soronthrel arrive!" Then she saw a spear flying towards Soronthrel and the mortal, who intercepted the projectile with his own, broad body. He collapsed in Soronthrel's

talons, impaled and bleeding rapidly. Quickly, Firianna transformed herself into a hawk and soared high above the chaos to guide Soronthrel into the fortress.

In one of the more secluded rooms in the fortress, Firianna paced impatiently and she demanded, "What is this mortal man doing here?" Soronthrel struggled to resume human form, and she could barely stand upright and covered in silver feathers, but her weather-worn face was still visible as she faced the angry Sidhe.

Both Iliiryana and Firianna glared hatefully at Thomas, who lay wounded in one of the beds, still recovering from the spears he had taken in his side. Before either one could strike him with their scimitars, Soronthrel leaped in front of them. "Do not touch him, I am in his debt. He took the spear meant for me! He is in my charge and no other shall touch him unless I request it!"

Thomas groaned softly as Soronthrel tended to the deep wound. Although it had gone far inside of him, it missed his vital organs. "I only did what I was supposed to do," he whispered softly. She examined the injury, then took another cloth soaked in an herbal infusion that a pair of androgynous wolf-people had mixed together.

"How dare she...?" fumed Firianna. "How could you let her descend so far?"

Iliiryana merely sighed and motioned for her to step aside. "You should know, Firianna Celethorn, were you not once human yourself until you also took it upon yourself to seek entry into Dunhèasa? Have you forgotten your own roots?" interrogated Iliiryana, her red-gold eyes flaring with sudden fire. Firianna gasped at the sudden transformation and for a moment shrunk back, fear showing in her clear green eyes. "But you were stronger, and have only known scorn," added Iliiryana, softening her expression a bit. "While Soronthrel Cuthalión has only known kindness and has never seen the pain that you have known."

"You mean to reveal the truth to her?" gasped Firianna, slightly confused.

"Whatever it takes, even if we must use deception," replied Iliiryana. "I have waited many years to enter Dunhèasa and I'll not pass my chances this time. And that man is a threat to the sanctity of that land."

Eyes widened in shock, Firianna hissed, "But surely you recall the honor code that the Eternal Huntress gave to us!" She moved her hand towards the hilt of her scimitar.

Standing nonchalantly, Iliiryana's reddish eyes lit up as she smirked. "But you forget. I am dhaerow, a fey creature of deception, and I have no concept of honor as you know it. And do you not remember what else Cylithera instructed?"

"To do what is necessary within honor..." She trembled slightly in fear, understanding Iliiryana's implications.

"And honor is upholding Her power and defending Dunhèasa at all costs," finished Iliiryana.

For a brief moment in Iliiryana's eyes, the aura of menace vanished from Firianna as she diminished into a diminutive young woman with thick glasses, an MIT T-shirt, and a huge book with a dead cat and a box on the cover. "Firianna, are your memories returning too?" she sneered, taking on a strong feline cast with her vertically-slit pupils.

"No. I am beyond that past," she spat back angrily, poised to strike if the arrogant half-dhaerow was going to make any further threats or insults.

Soronthrel looked around as she paced agitatedly. The giants of Vladivostok and the humans who followed Senator Joseph Mathers surrounded the fortress. "I should be out there..." she muttered.

"You can. You don't have to keep me in the picture," said Thomas faintly. "I'll be all right... you do what you must do..."

Nodding, she continued to pace, bow in hand. "No, it's not you, at least not significantly. A shadow hangs over me, a cloud of confusion."

Soronthrel was then interrupted by a shout from the next room. Two androgynous people with strongly lupine features burst into the room. "Soronthrel! The northern gate has been breached! Where are Captains Firianna and Iliiryana?"

"In the map room," pointed Soronthrel to the small room beyond. Then she noticed both of them were covered in blood. "Let me at least tend to your wounds..."

"No," said one of them, the slightly more female of the two. "It's the blood of our enemies after we had to deal with a few personally. But what are you going to do with that human? Isn't it enough that we bandaged him up?"

"He is my prisoner, Brivael. He possesses some vital knowledge," Soronthrel replied coldly. She crossed her fingers hoping that Thomas would play along. He groaned and shifted slightly, both from feigned pain and genuine discomfort at the sudden change in Soronthrel's demeanor again. She thought to herself, "Which one is Brivael and which one is Brynach? I hope I got their names right!"

With that, the two wolves ran into the map room, howling for Iliiryana and Firianna. "What?" began Thomas before Soronthrel motioned for him to be silent.

"I will have to go into battle after all then. Firianna won't be able to hold them off, even if Iliiryana gave her a hand with a large group of Sidhe. They are my spirit-sisters in the Eternal Hunt. I must help them," she said sternly and as she spoke, the claws on her hands grew sharper and it looked as if she would rip Thomas into small pieces and devour him.

Even amidst the pain several hours later, Thomas sat up, clutching his side. He winced for a moment, then struggled to his feet. Unsteadily, his broad six and a half foot tall frame lurched about, but he was still able to stand up straight. "I've got to find her..." he thought.

Searching the room, he found one of the poultices that Soronthrel had prepared for him and placed it on his side to ease the pain. Only a small scar remained, but he knew there was still much healing left. As he was about to step out, the door burst open and the lupine androgynous twins ran in with a stretcher. On the stretcher was none other than Firianna, covered in multiple wounds and tattered grey feathers and missing her left arm. Still, she held a defiant gaze and expression that indicated that had she not been found and rescued by the twins, she would have willingly fought to the death.

"We... have won the battle... but too few left for the war..." wheezed Firianna even as the twins set her down onto the bed that Thomas had just left. "Even if the rogue known as Greywolf was able to muster a strong enough army in such a short period..."

"What about Joanne, er, Soronthrel?" Is she all right?" he asked anxiously, concerned as he fumbled around for a poultice for Firianna's missing arm.

"Let her rest," said Brivael, the slightly feminine twin. "We have sent the hound wardens and the scouts to search for her. She fell near the Rift portal at the northern end, I saw her draw the giants to her and then..."

Brynach, the second twin, finished where Brivael could not. "She lured them into the portal and turned into a gigantic falcon and engaged in aerial combat with them... and then the leader of the fanatic mortals engaged her..."

"Fire... consumed her but she took human form and shot the monster before she plunged below... then the beast was sucked into the portal," interrupted Brivael.

Firianna stirred slightly, then said, "Thomas, Soronthrel is dying. She can only be saved mortal hands, though a life here will forbid her from ever entering Dunhèasa again for her mortal life. I was forbidden to tell you by Iliiryana so she would join the Eternal Huntress..."

both of them... but..." she closed her eyes, exhausted by exertion. By then, the twins had run back out to rescue more survivors.

Gently, Thomas cleaned the stump that remained of her left arm and said, "But what?"

Opening her eyes as some of her strength returned, she continued. "Soronthrel, or as you call her, Joanne, told me that she wanted to live a normal life. We were on the wall together and she confessed... She told me she just wanted to be a full-time professor at a university or a scientist somewhere and enjoy a relaxed life where she didn't have to fear an angry master or turning into a monster or even carrying all the powers she had..."

Before Firianna could continue, Thomas bolted out, allowing his instincts to lead him to Soronthrel. Had he stayed a moment longer, he would have heard her say, "She has many confusing feelings towards you... I think she likes you..."

Letting out a bold, defiant keening, Soronthrel stood at the entrance to the portal. With that, she willed herself to fly high above the ground, daring Senator Mathers to follow her. "I shall reveal what you are, Joseph Mathers and show that you have deceived the Crusading Promise Holders!" She nocked a lightning-tipped arrow to her bow and watched him intently before drawing and aiming.

"I won't let a monster and a blasphemer like you overthrow the will of God! Perhaps you should tell the truth too, heartless follower of Satan!" cackled the senator, also flying up to meet the falcon-woman.

Although no giants remained now that they had either been slain by ferocious Sidhe or lured to their deaths by Soronthrel, the humans far below watched in awe as their fearless leader the senator and the knight-errant faced each other. Their moment of awe faded when more Sidhe charged out from the temple, spurred on by a great panther that glowed with an eerie silver light.

Cries of "Whose side is the Night-Falcon on?" filled the air even as mortal and fey creatures clashed and crossed blades far below. Some of the more fortunate humans had guns, but unlike both humans and wild beasts, it took more than one or two bullets to deter a fey creature, especially an enraged Sidhe determined to defend their lands.

Soronthrel looked below, then her mind went back to the moment Firianna was knocked down from the ledge by a flying boulder. Even now, there was yet another group entering the fray – a small but fast-moving legion of men and women led by a woman wearing a wolf-pelt cloak and a wolf-mask on her face. Greywolf and the other knight-errants had come through, not in time to save Firianna, but perhaps in time to still win the battle. Rage coursed through her veins, saturating her, and what little memory she had of Joanne de Salvo vanished from her. She was not only Soronthrel Cuthaliòn, upholder of the ideals set by the Eternal Huntress and defender of Dunhèasa, but also Soronthrel the Avenger. With a fluid motion, she fired off several arrows at the senator.

Before he could react, two arrows struck him, leaving holes that leaked pink and red liquid. After a quick gesture of his hand, her arrows bounced off or passed through harmlessly. Smirking, he pulled out a pistol from his pocket and fired before praying to his un-named god. The bullet struck her in the chest, and had there been a heart, she would have found herself standing at the gates of the afterlife, but the emptiness merely turned the bullet into a painful sting that distracted her.

Keening again, she nocked another arrow, aiming in between the spheres of light that surrounded Senator Mathers. "Fly swift and true, may you break the wall," she chanted before loosing the arrow at his throat.

The arrow lodged in his throat but he did not slow down. Yanking it out and waving it at

her, he tried to fly up to her. "Come on, fight me, you coward! My god is far more powerful than yours!" he taunted. "I shall smite you and your pagan goddess!" He fired more bullets at her, this time at her arm.

Wordlessly, Soronthrel held her position and continued to fire, each arrow leaving the senator with more and more injuries. Once he drew close, though, she willed her bow into a falchion and began to slash at him, while the senator fired the last rounds left in his pistol before discarding the useless firearm. Silver blade and flashes of violet fire clashed as Soronthrel parried off the senator's spheres of fire. Frustrated, the senator closed his eyes and mumbled harsh noises and a huge cross-shaped cross formed over his head. "By the power of the almighty, smite the infidel!" he bellowed.

The cloud quickly solidified into what looked like gold and flew at Soronthrel, who tried to dodge the metal cross, which followed her and struck her. Cackling, the senator wiggled his middle finger and rainbow colored ropes emerged from the cross, trying to tie the stunned warrior to it. As soon as she felt the soft yet firm rope, she let out another keening cry as she pulled herself away. "Let's reveal the truth to all!" shouted the senator.

The feathers disappeared from Soronthrel's face and arms to reveal a frail human woman with thick glasses, at least in the eyes of the Sidhe below. To the humans below, Soronthrel's features became more angular and a long, scaled tail formed. She shrieked in pain as she felt herself being crucified. Her falchion also began to tremble and smoke before returning to its natural form as a recurve bow. The light began to fade and Soronthrel felt as if she were being crushed. Fog filled her mind as her vision grew dim, and she felt the rage slowly ebb away and she found herself fading back to Joanne de Salvo, the overworked college student she had nightmares about being.

A black-feathered silver arrow struck the senator from below, breaking his concentration, and the ropes on the cross faded long enough for Soronthrel to break free. She looked down to see Iliiryana with a dark-wooded recurve bow before she resumed panther form. Taking advantage of the opening that Iliiryana had provided, Soronthrel nocked an arrow to her bow, fired, then charged in at the senator, heedless of the risks. Her nails lengthened and grew sharper, while her teeth grew into fangs and feathers covered her entire body. Her feet burst out of her boots and deformed into avian feet with sharp, cruel talons.

Keening defiantly in anger, she allowed her talons to strike first before grappling him, biting, scratching, and falling completely into rage. The senator bled purple fire and he screamed incoherently as he struggled to escape. "In the name of..." he began before claws found his throat, ripping his windpipe apart. His body burst into flame as Soronthrel's claws and fangs tore his life away. Even as the senator's life faded into flame, Soronthrel, completely given into bestial urges, did not feel the pain of being consumed alive by flame. Then just as abruptly as the senator died, all of her strength vanished and darkness enveloped her as she fell to the ground far below.

"Dunhèasa... I come in..." she murmured to nobody in particular. A vision of clear blue skies, dense green pine and spruce forests, and swift-moving rivers cutting through white-capped mountains passed through her mind. Something warm and firm also surrounded her, cradling her shattered body as a gigantic, silver-feathered eagle flew overhead.

8 To Dunhèasa?

Thomas ran out as fast as his pain allowed him, stopping to catch his breath or to clutch his side as necessary. Then he saw the large mass of silver feathers, which he darted at eagerly. A cold wind began to blow and he could see Telcontar, Soronthrel's enchanted bow, but it glowed

with only a feeble white light, charred from fire, presumably from what Brivael and Brynach told him about. The wind grew stronger, blowing away the smouldering feathers to reveal a half-human, half-falcon woman. Right as Thomas reached Soronthrel's seemingly lifeless body, a gigantic panther leaped out, threatening with her ears back and red eyes glaring at him.

"Please..." began Thomas before the panther partially transformed back into Iliiryana, who still had her claws and fangs.

"Stay back, she has earned her way to Dunhèasa. I'll not let you interfere," snarled Iliiryana, poised to strike with her wickedly curved claws front and back.

Then, while Thomas and Iliiryana faced off, Soronthrel's voice, although soft and weak, cut through the howling wind. "Not yet... I am not ready..."

"She speaks," spoke Thomas, pushing past Iliiryana with his muscular body. "And she does not enter Dunhèasa yet."

"She will," snapped Iliiryana, reaching out to Soronthrel's bow, which burst into flame once more. "No mortal will take that opportunity from her." She quickly retracted her hand as flames leaped out and consumed both her hand and the bow, which began to pulsate wildly. Looking at the rapidly burning bow, she grabbed it again, but Thomas tackled her, trying to get her away from the fire. In return, she slashed at his face and chest, but left little more than superficial wounds. She tried to sink her fangs into him, but the huge man, in his own adrenaline-driven rage, was able to push her away and toss her aside.

"I burn," moaned Soronthrel weakly as her breath slowed and grew irregular. "Where am I?"

"Her heart must be returned!" bellowed Thomas, yanking the bow from Iliiryana's charred hands. As he forcefully pulled the bow away, the area around the riser began to crack and then shattered from Thomas' strength. Lightning flashed all around and sent Thomas staggering backwards for a moment, while Iliiryana remained kneeling in prayer to the Eternal Huntress, oblivious to the pain. A small solid fluttering object floated out from the fractured bow. Swiftly, Thomas reached out to the floating object, which tried to elude his grasp but his reflexes were faster, and he took it into his hand. At first, the heat from the object seared his large hands, but he ignored the heat and held it firmly, feeling its soft pulsations beat in time with his heart.

While Thomas struggled to get to Soronthrel, he saw Iliiryana transform once again into a giant panther. She roared and looked as if she would pounce on him, but instead she merely circled about, forcing any onlookers to stay away. Thomas heard her voice in his mind. "I will allow you this chance, but know that you will not be so fortunate the next time we meet. I have spoken with Soronthrel and with the Eternal Huntress, I know now that it is of her own will. Whether she decides in wisdom and folly, I cannot change her decision."

He knelt next to Soronthrel and tenderly held the beating heart close to him before placing it on her chest and pushing down it gently. "Joanne, please live. And Cylithera, please show mercy to one who wishes to be human once more, even if just for a few more years," he pleaded. At first, it looked as if he was only squashing the heart, but a small gap opened up in her chest and enveloped the heart. Behind him, the column of light that was known as the Rift gradually began to close. After the Rift closed, Thomas watched for any movement from Soronthrel. "Will she live?" he asked, tears streaming from his eyes. Iliiryana sat next to him, nuzzling against Soronthrel and then bowed her head, although she let out a soft roar when Thomas attempted to touch her. "Please..." he began and some of his tears landed on where the heart had entered her chest. "I love you," he whispered to Soronthrel as he leaned over to lightly stroke her forehead and cheek with his weatherworn hand. "I just want to do what's right..."

Suddenly, Soronthrel began to cough and her body jerked spastically and her eyes opened up. She moaned and groaned and the falcon-like features vanished, leaving her completely

human again, aside from a few feathers on her face, which fell off on their own when she stirred. "What the hell? Where am I?" she grunted.

"You're human again," said Thomas, smiling and taking her into a very tight embrace. "I... hope I didn't make too much of a mess of things..." he added apologetically.

"I guess you'll be stuck here," said Soronthrel to Iliiryana, embracing the mighty panther. "I'm sorry about keeping you trapped here and not keeping my promise to help you enter Dunhèasa."

"I'll find my way there," said Iliiryana's voice in her mind. "I'll still get to Dunhèasa, but next time, I'm going to be careful with you humans! I thought dhaerow were adept at deception, but you humans are the best by far!" Somehow, Soronthrel sensed a laugh coming from the usually stern panther-woman.

Soronthrel staggered to her feet with a bit of help from Thomas, who was no longer wounded or injured. He tried to lean down to kiss her, but she gently pushed him away. "I really do like you and I do want to take a chance with you, but I'm not quite ready yet. Unless, of course, you prefer Soronthrel Cutlhalión over Joanne de Salvo and if you don't mind dealing with the equivalent of a feral animal who's been out in the wild so long that she's forgotten what being human is like." For an instant, the cold, falcon-like expression returned, but it faded when she smiled.

Without hesitation, Thomas still hugged her and said, "We'll take things as slowly as we need to. I've waited all these years to find you again, and I can only imagine what you've been through." For the first time in years, he didn't feel that urge to get high again, as he usually did when he was nervous or uncomfortable.

"Soronthrel!" called out Greywolf, running as fast as possible and looking more like a werewolf than a human in her cloak and mask. "I hope we weren't too late to save you!" After she saw the young woman standing on unsteady feet next to Thomas, Greywolf breathed a sigh of relief as she hugged both Soronthrel and Thomas. "And thank you for taking good care of her."

Hugging Greywolf back, Soronthrel whispered, "I'm human again. Thank you for all you've done, both in inspiring me and in helping the Sidhe in the darkest times."

Even as she allowed Thomas to at least hold her in his huge arms, Soronthrel heard Cylithera's voice in her mind. "For what have you abandoned your quest to enter Dunhèasa? But, I shall let you have a second chance, Iliiryana and Firianna petitioned for you, as have Brynach and Brivael and Captain Greywolf, and I have witnessed your courageous acts myself. Until the next time, fare thee well!"

9 Ecological Society of America, Pasadena, CA

"The conclusions that can be drawn from this study are that the tropical rainforests are slowly returning after many years of deforestation and that while the cause is still being under investigation, satellite and aircraft data reveal a significant greening all around the world," said the young woman of perhaps no more than fifteen or sixteen years at the podium. She clicked on the keyboard, then continued. "And I would like to thank the following people and organizations for making my senior thesis possible: the SURF program at Caltech for getting me started, Katherine Castro and Wansheng Chan for helping me in the field, Vincent Gahan and Radu Hladek for providing me with a musical outlet in the form of the Geeksters, Dr. Joanne de Salvo for providing the FLORA data sets, and most of all my research mentor Dr. Alice Nguyen at Cal State LA." Two young men in the audience, perhaps about seventeen years old,

smiled. One was very tall and gangly with spiked blonde hair with brown roots, thick glasses, and a tie-dye yellow-green shirt, while the other was of medium height with a slender athletic build, spiked black hair, and was wearing tight black clothing with silver stripes on it.

"Any questions?" announced the presider, who had a very heavy Chinese accent even after many years of living in the United States. "Yes, John!" he pointed to an elderly man with a bushy white beard and a khaki outfit in the middle of the auditorium.

"So, I noticed that you have used the 970 nanometer water band index. Which formula did you use? It was not clear and I have found time and again that there have been significant differences between the different formulations," said the old man.

The speaker shifted a bit, then replied, "For this presentation, I used the continuum removal corrected method by de Salvo, but I also tried the older continuum removal algorithm designed by Claudio and Chowdhury. The de Salvo correction seemed to work a bit better for the humid ecosystem, although Claudio and Chowdhury was fairly robust."

"Any more questions for Tarathorn?" asked the presider.

"I have a quick comment!" piped up a stocky, late middle-aged woman with thick glasses, messy salt and pepper hair, and an energetic aura who sat behind the old man who had asked the question. She had a coat with a hood that made her look vaguely like a wolf. The speaker recognized the woman as Dr. Helen Claudio, one of the earlier speakers who had spoken about field validation of FLORA hyperspectral data in boreal and Arctic ecosystems. Next to her on either side were two men who were about the same age as her, one extremely tall and one short, both with solid, muscular builds. The shorter man, who wore a navy blue Caltech baseball cap, fidgeted constantly as he buried himself under a pile of papers with diagrams of chemical reaction mechanisms. The taller man, who had short brown and white hair, merely looked at Dr. Claudio and shrugged.

"Yes, Helen," said the presider, smiling at his former student.

"One thing you might want to consider for further work is the use of an ANCOVA to quantify the difference in the slopes between the pre-Rift, during the Rift, and post-Rift time periods and then use a Tukey or similar post-hoc test to identify the ones that are different," said Helen, pointing at a graph that Tarathorn had put up. "Oh, and one more thing, with the continuum removal method, something else you might consider is maybe using a slightly different algorithm than the basic ones we've used. Maybe something that'll clear even more of the noise out since that region is still pretty noisy."

"Thank you, Dr. Claudio," replied Tarathorn, blushing a bit. "I was about to ask."

"One more question," called out the tall man who sat next to Dr. Claudio.

Dr. Qiu looked at the clock, then said, "Yes, Kevin?"

"So, just as a random thought, could you use that model to estimate general biodiversity? And I know it's a bit beyond the scope of your talk, but can you use that model to try and predict where you can find different animals?"

"I think so, since a more complex canopy structure tends to help with biodiversity," she replied, trying to keep the puzzled expression out of her face.

"Time for us to continue," said the presider as the crowd began to applaud. Tarathorn gave a meek bow before stepping down with an almost eerie, fox-like grace. Joanne walked to where Tarathorn Sutankankul had stood earlier, fidgeted with the wireless microphone, and then loaded up her presentation onto the computer. "And for our final speaker in our symposium, we have Dr. Joanne de Salvo with her talk on her findings with changes the Arctic carbon cycle after the Rift was closed," said the elderly presider. "And for those of you who were living in an MTV-filled cave back then, or are too young to remember," he focused on the three Geeksters before continuing. "Joanne was the one who risked her life to fight the corrupt Senator Joseph

Mathers and courageously closed the Rift. She got her bachelor's degree in biology and master's degree in geography at California State University at Los Angeles, and she holds her doctorate's degree in ecology from University of Florida. She is now a tenured professor at the Institute of Environmental Science."

"Thank you, Hong-lie," began Joanne, still trying to get used to wearing a business suit after years of wearing field-appropriate clothing and carrying heavy equipment or weapons. "Today, I will present data that my research team has gathered in both Canada and Alaska as a follow-up to both the BOREAS and the Bio-Complexity projects from the early two thousands."

Forty five minutes later, the audience stood up and burst into applause when Joanne finished her talk, closing with, "So there is hope for us to restore at least a significant portion of the biodiversity and for us to re-balance the carbon cycle to prevent another repeat of what happened a few decades ago. But it will take effort on all our parts in research, outreach, and education. With that, I leave you with a challenge to continue our efforts no matter what." Once she finished her talk, the crowd stood up and burst into enthusiastic applause until the presider motioned for everyone to stop. Most enthusiastic was Thomas Held, the six and a half foot tall man who sat in the front row despite protests from the shorter people behind him.

Had anyone bothered to look in the darkest corner of the room, they would have seen a raven, a hawk, and an eagle perched, gazing intently at Joanne de Salvo. The hawk spoke. "Perhaps we have something to learn from those two renegades and the rest of those humans."

"We all do," agreed the raven. "Remember, I was the one who allowed that hulking ogre to stop her from entering Dunhèasa. So, are you regretting leaving your humanity?" She had a few haughty notes in her voice, all directed at the silver-feathered hawk.

The hawk cocked her head back and forth, then laughed. "Never. Let her deal with all the human stuff." Then keeping a close eye on both Joanne and Thomas, she sniffed, "I still hate human men. And I still can't believe Greywolf even went so far as to... become human again after being a Sidhe." Her keen eyes glared at Dr. Claudio, who was multitasking between answering questions from the audience and drinking coffee.

"Those two truly are defenders of Dunhèasa, more than any of us have been in our ways," said the eagle, ignoring the playful argument between the hawk and the raven. "It is indeed a lesson we must all take from these people, men and women alike, and someday, Dunhèasa will return to her former glory." Turning to Joanne, she whispered, "And one day, we shall meet again in Dunhèasa, where you can once more regain the mantle of Soronthrel Cuthalión, should life as a famous scientist make you weary once more!"